

Essays by Christadelphian Writers

Published by the Meriden Christadelphian Ecclesia

<http://www.meridenchristadelphians.com>

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Metamorphosis

We all need transformation. I do. So does the thief and the drug dealer. And not only does my annoying neighbor need it, but the sweet and helpful one does too. So does the person I love most in the entire world. There are no exceptions.

We all have behavior that needs correcting, and changing our behavior is necessary. When we seek to change our behavior, we need to think about it. We need to decide what we are going to do, and act on it. This is part of the wonderful process of growth, and it is good that we should participate in it. God, in fact, requires it of us (2 Peter 3:18).

But we can often accomplish this ourselves, through the application of Biblical principles, like so much fertilizer on our well-tended gardens. There is something more fundamental than behavior, though. It is the thing that drives our behavior: the mind behind it. To change it, we need more than growth – we need metamorphosis. “Be transformed [Greek, metamorphoo],” we are urged, “by the renewing of your mind. (Romans 12:2).

We are transformed when we begin to do godly things without having to think about them, when we are no longer driven by the flesh, when our behavior is good because we love doing good rather than because we have figured out what is the right thing to do.

Brand and Yancey (*Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, 1980) refer to the difficulty of assessing each and every situation to figure out what is right as “sorting through a blizzard of information.” The result is “helpless inactivity”.

“If I must decide whether to tell the truth in the face of every situation, my life is hopelessly complex. But if I have a reflex of truthfulness...I can learn to walk as a Christian without having to think about each individual step.”

If a bird had to analyze its speed of approach, rate of deceleration, angle of descent and grams of pressure to apply to the landing surface, it would be immobilized by the complexity of the process, even if it had the capability for such analysis.

But birds don't analyze, they simply fly. Similarly, we need to do godly things intuitively. Our natural instincts are mostly self-serving. We can't help that – it's the way we are made. But what is not natural to us can become instinctive. What is not our nature can become second nature. As Brand and Yancey suggest, we should “ground ourselves in contact with God and his Word so thoroughly that our Christian actions become like reflexes to us”.

We need to do this because we are not able, of ourselves, to be all that God has planned for us. Even though we may desire to be, we just don't have it in us. "For to will is present with me," says Paul, "but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Romans 7:18).

Sometimes even the will to do good is missing. It's clear that we can't be what God desires of us if we simply follow our own nature. We just can't do it. But God can, "for it is God who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13)

The mystery of metamorphosis is that the change is total. Growth, though beautiful and miraculous in itself, is not transformation. Transformation goes beyond growth. It is a complete change from one kind of life into another.

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17). Here is the transformation God seeks for us. We are no longer driven of ourselves, but of God.

This wonderful hope of transformation is ours not only as individuals, but for the world itself. Like the "old man" (Romans 6:6) that is put away, Jesus will say "the former things are passed away" (Revelation 21:4). And like the "new creature" that is of God, he will say of the world itself, "Behold, I make all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

Vicki and Dennis Martin

Idealism: Is It Really Ideal?

Idealism. It sounds like a good thing. Even the word itself, so often paired with "youthful", and contrasted with "cynicism", is attractive.

An ideal is held up as a model of perfection, something to be imitated, an example to inspire us to our highest attainments. There is nothing wrong with the ideal.

But adding "ism" after it tells a different story. Idealism, as applied to human thinking, means more than believing in, and attempting to follow an ideal model. What is usually implied is the belief that human beings embody the ideal. This is where we get into trouble.

If we had an ideal human leader, it would not be of great concern what form our government took. Monarchy? No problem. Absolute monarchy? With an ideal king, we would be fine. Democracy? Sure, the people are ideal too. We all want what is best for the majority. Communism? Wonderful! Share and share alike. But the best and most efficient form of government -- with our ideal leader, of course -- would be dictatorship. This leader would always have the people's good at heart, and no one would stand in his way of bringing about that good.

But if you read the newspapers even occasionally, you are probably already convinced that dictatorship is not a good idea.

In its over 225 years of existence, the United States has never had a Chairman Mao, an Ayatollah Khomeini, or a Saddam Hussein. How have we managed to avoid such a power problem? It is tempting to think that it is because our character is a little better, or because we are more civilized, or even because we are Christian. But the sad truth is, none of these things elevates our basic nature above that of anyone else in the world. We will have to look elsewhere for the answer.

John Steele Gordon, who writes on business and economics for American Heritage magazine, has this to say about our system of government: "by dividing power among three branches, the authors of the Constitution intended each branch to guard against the other two becoming too powerful." (Strong Investor, Spring 2003). Why was this necessary? It certainly slows down the action. Things would be done far more quickly if we didn't

have to contend with this bureaucracy. Yet our Founding Fathers knew it was necessary. "They reasoned, with a profound understanding of human nature, that...politicians would always seek more power..." He is talking about our politicians, remember, not those half a world away. Human nature is quite comfortably entrenched right here on American soil, in American hearts, and in American politics.

When Jeremiah said "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9), he wasn't just talking about Saddam Hussein. "The heart" means the heart of man -- every one of us.

Even the Apostle Paul said that "sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it, slew me" (Rom 7:11). Where was that deceitful sin? In his own heart. "For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing" (v. 18). Try as he would, Paul could not get rid of that "law of sin which is in my members" (v.23): human nature.

Well, what can we do about it? Our first job is to recognize it, as did our Founding Fathers when they drew up our constitution. We can be helped, but we must first recognize that we need help.

The Jews of Paul's day, like all humans, were prone to thinking that they were just a little better than others which, in their minds, accounted for the favor that God had shown them. And we, like them, have to recognize that it just isn't so.

"What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin" (Rom 3:9). We have the further declaration that "there is none righteous, no, not one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks after God. They have all gone out of the way. They have together become unprofitable. There is none who does good, no, not one" (Rom 3:10-12, NKJV). Quite a litany of man's failure in the righteousness arena.

This being the case, what hope of righteousness does anyone have? We can look to Abraham, who "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:3). There may be none righteous, but God "justifies the ungodly," such as Abraham -- and ourselves -- because our "faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom 4:5 NKJV).

Since "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), there would be no hope except for this fact that "God reckons righteousness apart from works" (Rom4:6).

We are fortunate to live under a constitution which was deliberately constructed to weather the force of human nature. But are "we" (America) better than "they" (fill in the blank)? We must ask, with Paul "Where then is boasting?". And answer with him, "It is excluded" (Rom 3:27 NAS).

Not our righteousness, but God's, is demonstrated by His grace. It is "for the demonstration , I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 2:26 NAS).

Dennis and Vicki Martin

What Does God Really Want?

Imagine that you are a parent. Or, maybe you don't need to imagine. Your young child, say a 13-year-old daughter, wants to do something really nice for you. Maybe it is your birthday, or Mother's Day, or she wants to do it -- just because. You have been working 10-hour days and trying to keep up with your housework on weekends. What you really need is a little help with the basic housework so that you can both enjoy some relaxed time together.

She asks you what she can give you. "Honey, if you would just clean your room, I would be so happy," you say. "Mo-o-o-om!" she whines. She wants to do something special, not something humdrum. What you want and need from her is simple responsiveness to your true requirements.

But she wants to surprise you. At supper, she presents you with a colorfully wrapped box. You open it, and find a hand-made glazed clay vase in her favorite color. It is not perfect, but it is carefully made, and you know she spent a lot of time on it.

Of course, you love it. How can you not? But her room is still a mess and, although you don't bring it up now, you know there will be some unpleasantness to deal with later. And, despite your fatigue, you will need to stay up late and see that she does the job.

God's children often wish to delight their Father with something special. We have a long history of doing this. Architects have dedicated their finest cathedrals to the glory of God. Likewise artists, within or without the walls of the church, have thought their best works to be their highest tribute to God. When I was in grade school, my piano teacher sought to inspire me to more diligent practice by telling me that Bach had dedicated every one of his compositions to God. I was impressed, both with the music and the dedication. I may have even practiced a little bit more.

But what does God really want? "Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Micah 6:6-7). We want to do something dramatic and special, something visible that would draw gasps of wonder at such a gift. But

"what doth the Lord require of thee? " (v. 8). It is not anything big or impressive. It does not take artistic genius, or any kind of genius, to give God what he truly wants. We have only "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (v. 8).

Why is it so difficult to do this? It has been so from the first generations of mankind. Only one generation removed from Eden Cain, a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd, brought their offerings to the Lord. Both presumably brought the best that they had. But was it what God wanted? "The Lord had respect unto Abel and his offering, but unto Cain and his offering he had not respect" (Gen 4:4-5). Cain was furious. But God said simply, "if you do well, you will be accepted (v.7). What was missing from Cain's offering? It was not that Cain was less talented or capable of producing a quality gift. But Hebrews tells us that "by faith Abel offered unto God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain (Heb. 11:4). God had gently shown his creatures the way to redemption by providing them with coverings of skin. Whether or not they fully understood the concept of sacrifice and its relation to God's own son who was to come, we don't know. But Abel believed God. And, believing him, offered not simply what he did best, but what God truly wanted.

Farmers, shepherds, architects, artists, musicians -- we have all wanted to give God something of beauty, something unique and special. And, like other good parents, God no doubt appreciates our childlike efforts. But maybe, just maybe, what he really wants.....is for us to clean our rooms.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Addicted to Sin

"I can't begin to understand the pain that the parents of those children and these young women that I have harmed feel. And I can't restore really much to them, if anything, and I won't pretend to. I don't even expect them to forgive me, and I'm not asking for it. That kind of forgiveness is of God? I don't want to die. I deserve, certainly, the most extreme punishment that society has, and I think that society deserves to be protected from me?" (Life on the Edge, James Dobson, 1995 Word Publishing, p. 199, quote from an interview).

Remember Ted Bundy? If you were old enough to read the newspaper in 1978, you probably do. He was convicted ? and later executed ? for raping, torturing and murdering at least 28 young women and children. The public outcry against him, once he was found out, was fierce, and the media attention given to his execution made him a byword in every state in the U.S. It is less likely though, that you were aware of his words of remorse and contrition.

Bundy, by his own account, "grew up in a wonderful home with two dedicated and loving parents. It was a fine, solid, Christian home." (p. 194). But Bundy had a secret addiction that he was unable to escape from by himself. He was addicted to pornography. And from that beginning flowed all of the unspeakable crimes he committed.

An addiction is a habit that is so strong, so powerful, that we will do nearly anything to support it. There may be a genetic component to addiction which, certainly, is not the addict's fault. Yet it is his responsibility to deal with it. Bundy recognized this. He described it as "something so awful, so alien, and?.{yet you } realize that, basically, you are responsible" (p. 196).

Would any of us disagree that Bundy was responsible for what he did? I doubt it. And yet the power of addiction is such that it seems truly beyond the addict's control. Many experts on the subject of addiction have recognized this. A brief perusal of several professional websites dedicated to helping people combat addictive behaviors brings up these statements:

"An addiction is behavior a person cannot control"

"The basic characteristic that defines addiction is the 'loss of control' phenomenon"

"Diagnosing addiction is usually simple?If an individual intends to control his or her drinking or using and fails to do so, he or she is probably addicted."

The Encyclopedia Britannica, in its section on drug addiction, states "the major problem that comes from abuse?is dependence. The user feels compelled?"

This feeling of compulsion, that the behavior is no longer under our own control, is a hallmark of addiction. It is echoed by the apostle Paul, when he tells of how powerfully he is drawn to do the very things he does not wish: "It is not I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me" (Romans 7:20).

We tend to categorize sins into "harmless" and "serious". Yet both emanate from the same impulses and our failure to recognize and deal with them. As Bundy was addicted to pornography, others are addicted to alcohol, drugs, sexual experimentation, or other behaviors.

We have learned to be compassionate toward most of these people, because we recognize that some people are inherently "driven" by their addiction. But when it comes to inflicting obvious harm on others, we draw the line. We might consider hating our brother to be harmless, but killing him ? that is another matter. Yet Jesus looked on them both in the same way: "whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). They are not separate categories of sins, but a continuum, along which those vulnerable to addiction are swiftly and inexorably drawn.

We are not a community of "us" normal people and "those" addicts. Bundy said "basically, I was a normal person?I had good friends, I lived a normal life?those of us who have been so much influenced by violence in the media ? in particular pornographic violence ? are not some kinds of inherent monsters. We are your sons, and we are your husbands" (p. 196).

The apostle Paul describes himself as "sold under sin" (Romans 7:14). Paul isn't just talking about the Hitlers and Stalins ? and Bundys ? of the world. He is talking about himself: "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to

sin" (Romans 7:14 NAS). We are slaves to sin (Romans 6:16). Enslaved! What is this, if not addiction? Yes, we are all addicted to sin. We need to understand this if we are to understand the power that sin has over us.

Is there hope for an addict? Alcoholics Anonymous has shown that there is, but that acknowledgement of both our addiction and our need for help are required. God has shown us this too. Apart from God's help, we are simply "hooked" on sin. Jesus said "everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34, NIV). And we all do sin: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us"(1 John 1:10).

God teaches us to acknowledge our sin. "If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive" (1 John 1:9). But we must go even further, and seek help in turning from sin. It is no use thinking we can do it on our own. How can we put to death the deeds of the flesh (that is, sin), when sin is an inherent part of our nature? It can only be done with the help of God's spirit: "If ye through the spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Romans 8:13). It is that same spirit that "helps us in our weakness" (Romans 8:26, NIV).

Throughout our mortal lives, we will always be addicted to sin. That does not mean we must continue to practice it. Like the alcoholic who stops drinking, yet must recognize that he is still an alcoholic, we can abandon our sinful practices, yet must recognize that we are still sinners. We will always need God's help to avoid becoming entangled again. Just as, to the alcoholic there is no such thing as a harmless drink, for us sinners there is no such thing as a harmless sin. Not recognizing this was the terrible mistake Ted Bundy made.

Yes, we are all addicted to sin, but we can do something about it. We can start by acknowledging our addiction, and asking for help. Let's take that first step right now.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

I was in the kitchen not long ago when our hard-of-hearing son turned on the CD player very loudly. Being up to my elbows in food preparation, I could not dash in and turn it off. "What IS this??" I wondered, hearing only blaring dissonances and heavy beats. I am hard-of-hearing too, and even with hearing aids can only perceive a limited range of sounds. Most of the sounds emanating from the CD were outside that range, unheard by me. I was about to yell "turn that thing off now!", when Yvain sauntered into the kitchen and asked "Mom, how do you like that Brahms symphony?". I stopped and listened, my mouth still open in readiness to shout. "Oh," I said, after a pause. "That's very nice". And it was. Knowing what it was, I could fill in the missing parts and appreciate the full composition. I could not fill them in. Yet I was not aware of filling in anything at all. I was hearing the entire work.

Not only do we transform non-aural information into the sounds of music or speech, but more interesting we are not aware of doing it. Often, we truly do not know when we are guessing and when we are not. All information, from whatever sources, is woven seamlessly into a perfect whole.

For a person who has had sufficient experience with sound to know what things "should" sound like, the transformation can be total. Oliver Sacks writes of a young man who had become deaf at age 8. The deaf man is quoted: "from the very first my eyes had unconsciously begun to translate motion into sound. My mother spent most of the day beside me, and I understood everything she said. Why not? Without knowing it, I had been reading her mouth all my life. When she spoke I seemed to hear her voice. It was an illusion which persisted even after I knew it was an illusion". Sacks refers to these sounds as "phantasmal voices".

Such illusions make possible the continued familiarity of voices now silent, the continued appreciation of music only dimly heard. Without this ability, the musical experience of the hard-of-hearing would become hopelessly fragmented, as indeed it is when we are lacking non-auditory clues about it. But with such clues, we can continue to enjoy an art we can no longer perceive by its primary mode.

Another type of aural illusion, is described by K. C. Cole ("The Universe and the Teacup"). Both light and sound, she observes, are perceived by us on a logarithmic scale. "the intensity of sounds ranges over such an enormous range that there's no way you could get a non-exponential system to handle that", she says. The same is true of sight. "The human eye can see a range of well over a million different shades of brightness but we don't perceive the brightest thing we can see as a million times brighter than the dimmest". In fact, all of our senses present the world to us in this "distorted" way. "It could not be otherwise, because only a logarithmic scale can encompass such a huge range of responses".

To be able to appreciate the full range of reality within the confines of our brains is a miraculous thing. But the fact of the matter is, our perceptions do not always represent what truly is. What we seem to hear is not what we actually hear. It is far more wonderful. What then is the relation between perception and truth? And if God is concerned with truth, how does he justify these distortions?

Truth is a fundamental characteristic of God. His truth "reaches unto the skies" (Psalm 108:4), and "the truth of the Lord endures for ever" (Psalm 117:2). His truth fills all time and space. And he gives it to us in his word: "thy word is truth" (John 17:17). He has also given us the embodiment of truth in his son, the word made flesh: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

Truth is clearly at the heart of things, and it is God who gives us the equipment to perceive it. Do perceptions lie? We know that God does not lie (Titus 1:2), yet it is he who gave us our perceptual machinery. If that machinery sometimes presents things to us as being what they are not, is that in order to deceive us, or to enable us to know more? Our ability to apprehend an enormous range of signals suggests that it is not deception but larger truth that God seeks for us.

Even the deceptions that our senses perform are no barrier to knowing the truth, if we genuinely want to find out, because God has given us one more thing to bridge the gap between perception and truth. He has given us reason, and invites us to use it: "Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord" (Isaiah 1:18).

We have the ability to analyze, to scrutinize, and to put things to the test. We may learn, for example, that although 70 decibels sounds only somewhat louder than 60 decibels, it represents nearly ten times as much sound energy. We know this because we can measure things.

Thus we have both the scope and the precision to understand and appreciate what is around us. Ultimately, this ingenious design enables us to direct our steps "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13), and expands our scope so that it can include God.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Tolerance and Diversity

Sexual behavior is an aspect of God's law that we seem to have latched onto with particularly strong opinions. The very laws of our country (though some are now trying to change them) recognize marriage as being between one man and one woman: That is, the parties must be of the opposite sex, and there may be only one spouse per person. Some of us may look with disdain on those who depart from this norm.

It does seem that God tolerated some deviation from these practices, though he clearly stated from the beginning what he preferred in these matters.

Abraham, Isaac, David, and others of God's most faithful servants, had multiple wives. In David's case, he not only took the wife of a married man, but he proceeded to make sure the husband was not around to know his breach of trust: he effectively sent Uriah to his death.

Abraham was not only God's friend (James 2:23), but was selected to be the father of God's chosen nation, Israel. Yet he had more than one wife. So did Jacob, for whom Israel is named. We would not allow this in 2005 in the USA.

Are we more righteous than Abraham? In this one particular practice, perhaps. But maybe the people of Abraham's day would have been equally dismayed by our lack of hospitality, our greediness, or some other aspect of our behavior that does not meet God's standards.

Today, though we frown on polygamy, both adultery and homosexuality are considered acceptable by a large minority, if not a majority of people. Both are common and powerful temptations, and many would like to see them legitimized.

We seem to want not only unconditional love, but unconditional approval, and sometimes we look for it in God's own character. If God is tolerant, our reasoning goes, we should be too. But should we approve every kind of behavior? God doesn't. He offers his love to every sort of person, but his approval depends on how we respond to that love.

The real question is: can we, like God, love someone even while disapproving of his/her behavior? If you have raised children, you know that we can.

This is not so different from the way God describes his own feelings. "Israel is my son," God said. Yet he did not approve of their ways. "All day long have I stretched out my hands to a disobedient and gainsaying people..." Still, he did not turn his back on his children. "Hath God cast away his people?" Paul asked (Romans 11:1). The answer, in case we have any doubt, is given: "God hath not cast away his people."

How did Jesus show tolerance toward the woman at the well, whose weaknesses he well knew? Certainly, public opinion was against her. But Jesus put little stock in public opinion himself. If

Jesus approved of her living with numerous men out of marriage, or in serial marriages, surely he would have defended her behavior. Instead, he asked her to change her life.

We don't know whether the woman ever committed that sin again. She very well may have. Most of us fail again even when we try to change. For a person of the homosexual persuasion, as for the woman at the well, the question is not, has he sinned -- for "all have sinned" (Romans 3:23). The question is instead, does he live for sin? Or, will he try to change? Hardness, not weakness, separates us from Christ.

Should we expect a homosexual to deny his own feelings and desires? We tend to approve of most self-expression these days. But what is wrong with self-denial? Jesus denied his very life for our benefit. And he advises such a frame of mind for the rest of us too: "Let [a man] deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24).

If, as many people think, homosexuality is an inborn tendency, we might understandably ask why God allows a person to be born this way, when it means he will have, apparently, an even greater burden of self-denial to bear. We don't know the answer to this, but sexuality is not the only aspect of our nature that must be brought under control. It is quite natural for us to dishonor our parents when we are mad at them. It is natural for us to steal time from our employer when we are bored with our work. It is natural to lie when we find ourselves in a tight spot. Yet God commands us not to do these things, however natural they may be.

Each of us has burdens we carry in our attempt to follow Christ. Each requires self-denial. Some people are driven to seek multiple sexual partners, when we are instructed to be devoted to one. Some suffer depression, when we are told to "count it all joy". Still others crave alcohol, though drunkenness is severely criticized. There are burdens of obsession, burdens of covetousness, burdens of idolatry. None of us is singled out to bear these burdens, we all bear them. They are the burdens of being human. Self-indulgence is not the way Jesus dealt with them. And he doesn't recommend it for us, either.

Can a homosexual change his/her desires? The prevailing wisdom says, No. Maybe this is correct. We can't change our basic human nature. Yet God calls us to a standard of behavior that often requires us to discipline our nature. Unhealthful foods we once craved stop being so tempting when we cease to cultivate the habit of eating them. An activity we once avoided becomes enjoyable once we begin to practice it. And wise counselors often advise us to treat those we dislike as though we loved them, because so often the change of behavior results in a change of heart.

But it's not that simple, you say. And you are right, it isn't. Life is complicated because we are. Temptation isn't going to go away any time soon. Sometimes it will even increase as we make an effort to resist it. God, not we, will prevail.

We have no right to say that it was okay for Abraham to have multiple wives, when God permitted only one. Nor do we have the right to say that same-sex partnerships are acceptable because we live in a different and complex culture. But we do need to look beyond these behaviors to the heart of things.

In our hearts, we know that we feel the greatest hope and reassurance not when we get unconditional approval, but when people know us for what we are, and love us anyway. This is how I see God's love, and that of many wise human beings. This is the love that I want you to have toward me, and that I will try to give you.

It is tolerance at its best.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

How Smart Do We Need To Be?

It would be nice to be smarter. It would save me a lot of time if I could figure things out faster, and a lot of steps if I could remember what I was after when I headed down the stairs.

Several drugs on the market now promise to make that happen. One is an old standby, Ritalin, a stimulant that has long been used to lend stability to the conduct of ADHD children. Two are newer drugs, potentially useful to those whose thinking processes are unraveling due to age or disease. The latest trend with such drugs is use by normal healthy people to give them an edge in mental performance.

At what cost? Of course, we do not know the long-term physical effects of the newer drugs. With rare exceptions, long-term drug use carries a significant risk of physical side effects. Scientists are even more concerned with long-term effects on the way we think: possibly cluttering our brains with unnecessary information, or affecting our ability to understand and use what we know.

"There's no free lunch", says geneticist Tim Tully of Cold Springs Harbor labs. Adds Martha Farah of the University of Pennsylvania, "we meddle with these things at our peril."

I frequently hear the advice "work smarter, not harder". Good idea, we might think, when we have too much to do in too little time with too few resources.

But there are things that cannot be hurried. When we cultivate friends, we need to spend time with them. Never mind all of the short-cut advice on how to "read" body language, what your friend's wardrobe tells you about her, or three easy ways to recapture your husband's heart. Don't put all of your trust in "quality time" either. Some things you just can't do without "quantity time".

Suppose you want to get to know God better. If you are a smart person, you may read his book, notice and remember dozens of facts, and draw many interesting comparisons before I have even sorted out the book of Genesis. But if you and I have spent the same amount of time on it, we will probably both be equally improved by the experience.

A friend once said that if you want to learn the Bible, "you have to spend the time there". I thought of him spending days weeks, maybe preparing a Bible class or seminar, and I knew he was right. If you can prepare two talks, lead a Sunday School class, and write an article in the spare time you find in one week, you are no doubt working smart, and providing a benefit to others. Yet your own growth will not take place any faster for the speed at which you work.

"Blessed is the man", David wrote, whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:2). David himself did this. "Thy law," he says, "is my meditation all the day (Psalm 119:97), and "I remember thee upon my bed, and meditate on thee

in the night watches" (Psalm 63:6). Could he have improved on this, maybe, and completed all of his meditation tasks before, say, 8 PM? Could he (and can we) meditate faster?

Think of all of the hours that Jesus spent in prayer. Might a little time-management instruction have helped him squeeze it all in, and still get the sleep he needed?

Most of the things that God wants to see in our character are things that you can't acquire any faster by being smarter. Our more intelligent friends will develop them no more quickly than we.

Faith, hope, love, joy, peace, patience, humility the list goes on. None of these requires exceptional intelligence, but all require time. Intelligence is good, certainly. But more isn't always better.

Whether we have a high or low IQ is not something God seems overly concerned with. What he is concerned with is how we use our intelligence, and how we spend our time. He is concerned with the development and application of wisdom in our lives. Wisdom may indeed be a type of intelligence, but it isn't the kind that can be measured with an IQ test. And it isn't the kind that is likely to be enhanced by ingesting chemicals.

"Wisdom is the principal thing", says Proverbs, "therefore get wisdom. And with all thy getting, get understanding" (Proverbs 4:7). God has given us the right equipment, and he calls us to "reason together" with him (Isaiah 1:18).

If we apply the intelligence we have; if we reason together using God's word; if we spend time with him; we will "get understanding". Like Solomon, we should "search, and seek out wisdom and the reason of things" (Ecclesiastes 7:25). Let's do it. We're smart enough.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

The Womb of God

To become “sons of God”, we must be born again, we must be born of God (John 1:7,12-13).

How can this be? Can God give birth to us? Nicodemus asked if we could re-enter the womb and thus be born anew. Jesus answered, “that which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of spirit is spirit”. We can’t go back into the fleshly womb and be born – nor would there be any reason to, since we are already here in the flesh. But we can be brought forth as spiritual creatures out of the womb of God.

Does this seem like a strange idea? It was not a new one, even when Jesus spoke of it. The concept was already there in the Old Testament. Through Isaiah (46:3-4), God says, “Hearken to me, O house of Israel, which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb. And even to your old age I am he; and even to your hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.”

The Hebrew word *malat* means to deliver, as in giving birth. But it also means deliverance of another kind: the kind that rescues us from death or danger.

In Psalm 107, God speaks of his people Israel, “the redeemed of the Lord...whom he has redeemed from the hand of the enemy.” (verse 2). Four instances are given of God’s intervention on their behalf:

(Psalm 107:4-7)

“They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way...hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distress.

And he led them forth by the right way...”

(verses 10-14)

“Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and iron, because they rebelled against the words of God...

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and...

He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death”.

(verses 17-20)

“Fools because of their transgression,...they draw near unto the gates of death.

Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and ...

He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from destruction.”

(verses 24-30)

“They...see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep... the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves...they reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits’ end.

Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and...

He makes the storm a calm, so that the waves are still...so he brings them to their desired haven.”

Each of these four episodes begins with distress. They are lost, wandering in unmarked land, or battling the wind and the waves. Sometimes the distress is self-induced: they rebelled; they became fools.

Each time, they cried to their God for help. And, whatever the cause of their trouble, God came to their aid. He led them by the right way, he brought them out of darkness, he delivered (malat) them from destruction. And at last, he brought them to a safe haven.

He not only bore them on eagle’s wings (Exodus 19:4), he bore them in a more intimate sense. “When Israel was a child, then I loved him,” he says (Hosea 11:1), “and called my son out of Egypt”.

And he will do more: “I will extend peace to her like a river... you shall suck, you shall be borne upon the sides, and be dandled upon the knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you;” (Isaiah 66:12-13).

Like a mother, “he satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry with goodness” (Psalm 107:9).

Two kinds of deliverance are implied at once: rescue and rebirth. Only God can effect both. In fact, with him, the two types are one and the same. For in bringing us to spiritual birth, he delivers us from sin and death. We are borne by him, as Israel was, delivered not only from something, but to something:

He brought them out of the land of bondage, “brought you into the land...” (Judges 2:1). “I brought you,” he reminds them, “into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof” (Jeremiah 2:7).

But most amazing of all is the destination we hope to share: “I brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4).

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Impossible With God

People have always tried to come to terms with the idea that the God who loves us allows terrible things to happen to us. Some have concluded that God does not exist; others, that he is not good. Still others may concede that though God has his own brand of lofty righteousness, it is devoid of love for his creatures. If God is all-powerful, the reasoning goes, then he has the power to stop the mayhem. And if he does not do so, then he must not love us after all.

Why else would bad things happen to good people?

A new slant on this problem of suffering was offered when Harold Kushner's book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* was published. Kushner argued that the reason God does not stop the evil is that he can't. God is good, he does love us, but he is unable to keep us from suffering.

Kushner may be partly right.

The Bible has much to say about God's goodness and love. But it is the thought that God's power is limited that raises eyebrows. After all, God's invincible power and might are brought home to us in the Bible too.

But there are times when inability to do something reflects on neither the goodness nor the power of the person in question. There exists a logical "can't" as well as a "can't" for lack of power. I, for instance, can't make two plus two equal five. And I doubt that God can either. Because, given the principles of mathematics on which the universe is established, the sum of two plus two is a given.

The Bible tells us that "with God, nothing shall be impossible." (Luke 1:37). Yet there are things he cannot do. One of the things God cannot do is lie. It is "impossible for God to lie" (Hebrews 6:18). Why can't God lie? Doesn't he know how? Maybe lying is impossible for the same reason we can't change the sum of two plus two. It just isn't in the nature of things.

This may also be why he can't make our lives easier. It's hard for us to see this as a logical impossibility, but maybe it is.

Could God have made Jesus' life easier? Jesus desperately wanted him to. One of the most heart-rending passages in the Bible is Jesus' plea "Oh my Father, if it is possible, let this cup be removed from me!" (Matthew 26:39).

Was it possible? Could God have kept Jesus from suffering? How deeply the Almighty wanted to! "Now is my soul troubled... Father, save me from this hour" Jesus pleaded, while yet recognizing the paradox: "but for this very reason I came to this hour" (John 12:27).

“Shall I not drink the cup my Father has given me?” (John 18:11) Jesus said to Peter, who himself was ready to save Jesus from the mob. “Do you not think that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? (Matthew 26:53). God had the power. But the choice was Jesus’.

We understand even less than Jesus why some things are logically impossible for God to do. Jesus prayed for the cup to be removed from him, but he didn’t know if it was even possible. What was not possible was for Jesus to act in total love and obedience and yet escape the terrible choice he had to make.

Freedom of choice is one of the things that God has made part of our nature. There are consequences to having that freedom -- consequences for us, and consequences for God. We can’t logically have freedom of choice, and yet have God make the choices for us.

And we can’t love without freedom of choice. The two go together. Jesus’ willingness to die proved forever that he loves us, for “greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friend” (John 15:13).

Because of the principles on which God based our world, some things we might earnestly desire him to do for us are impossible. But something else was impossible too: though Jesus died, it was not possible that death should hold him (Acts 2:24).

You might say it was impossible for God to leave Jesus in the grave. Jesus struggled to understand why God had forsaken him (Matthew 27:46). And we too often wonder, “where is God when we need him?” But the resurrection gives us hope that God is indeed there, and that “all things” – life itself – are possible with God.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Shocking Truth

David in a prophetic utterance makes a shocking exclamation: “O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.” (Psalm 137: 8-9).

Perhaps because of the use of the word “happy”, we may get the impression here of an angry person taking horrific vengeance on those he hates. Our horror is only increased when we realize that it is God who will do this.

For it is God who will bring about this destruction. Jeremiah elaborates: “How is Babylon become a desolation among the nations!...I am against thee, O thou most proud, saith the Lord God of hosts: for thy day is come, the time that I will visit thee” (Isaiah 50:23,31). It is as we might expect. Those who rebel against God will be vanquished, and God himself is the one who will requite evil: “Vengeance is mine...saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

Yet God claims to be merciful, and those who love him praise his great mercy:

Nehemiah exclaimed “thou art a gracious and merciful God.” (Nehemiah 9:31).

David frequently remarks on God’s mercy: “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” (Psalm 103:8).

Joel pleaded with the people to return to God, “for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness” (Joel 2:13).

And in the New Testament, the writer to the Hebrews confirms that God is merciful even to those who do not deserve mercy: “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Hebrews 8:12).

No, it is not the destruction that makes God “happy”. In fact, God tells us quite plainly that he takes “no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (Ezekiel 33:11). It is possible for sin to be broken yet the sinner saved, for the Lord is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Nor are we his children to gloat over the downfall of the wicked. “Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth:”, we are told (Proverbs 24:17). Job recognized this and, hoping to justify himself before God, said “This also were an iniquity to be punished...if I rejoiced at the destruction of him that hated me” (Job 31:28-29). He claims not to have done so.

We must not rejoice at the downfall of even the wicked, but we may be “happy” in the sense of being blessed, as it is used in Matthew 5:4 “Blessed are they that mourn”. Now, mourning is the

opposite of happiness as we usually think of it. But the blessedness of this mourner is not in his rejoicing. He is blessed in his desire for righteousness, and is grieved by its absence.

Is there something more in this idea of dashing people against the stones? What people, we might ask, and what stones? In Psalm 137, the people so destroyed are those of Babylon. But Isaiah speaks of the Lord himself being a stone, and his own people broken upon it: “And he shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel, for a gin and for a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many among them shall stumble, and fall, and be broken, and be snared, and be taken” (Isaiah 8:14-15)

Does the Bible echo this anywhere else? We should remember that the Psalms are prophecy, foreshadowing Christ. The same writer who speaks of the utter destruction of Babylon against the rocks reminds us that “the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner” (Psalm 118:22).

Explaining that Christ is that stone, Peter says “unto you therefore which believe he is precious, but unto them which be disobedient....a stone of stumbling” (1 Peter 2:7-8). Matthew and Luke both describe the fate of those who stumble over Christ the Rock: “Whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken, but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder” (Matthew 21:44, Luke 20:18).

That those who so stumble are God’s own people is clear: “But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness... For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; As it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.” (Luke 9:31-33).

We often do stumble at God’s word, especially when confronted with such arresting images as those presented in the Psalms. But let’s pick ourselves up, shake off the dust, and recognize that the severity of the image is an accurate picture of God’s hatred for sin. If we are shocked by this, we should be. Sin is shocking.

It can also be forgiven. In fact, the very Rock on which we stumble can be the means of our forgiveness. Babylon, or God’s own people – we all stumble. Whether we are dashed against the Rock, or find reconciliation through it, depends upon how we receive God’s astounding offer of forgiveness.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Out of Nothing

Two weeks ago, the 44th annual Nobel Conference was held at Gustavus Adolphus College. This year, experts in fields from molecular biology to theology brought their perspectives to the topic of “Who Were the First Humans?”

As children, we learned that Adam and Eve were the first humans, and we learned that God created them. But the theory that all life, including human life, evolved from a common source has in many minds displaced special creation as the theory of our origins.

Evolution assumes that there was a time when there was no life. In fact, if you go back far enough, there was nothing at all. When something appeared, perhaps at the Big Bang, we have “the beginning”. Whether the beginning was a big bang or the word spoken by God, we have this situation: there was nothing, and then there was something.

Evolutionary biologists point to similarities in DNA to show how the species evolved, and to which family they belong. For example, the Nobel Conference preview booklet points out that some “DNA sequences of humans and chimpanzees differ by only 1.2 percent.” Elsewhere, it has been said that 3 percent, or 4 percent, or 5 percent of our DNA differs from that of the apes. Even without DNA, it isn’t hard to see some similarities. Does this imply a family relationship?

Humans love to sort things. This is really just another way of saying that we love to analyze. We sort our collections of coins, stamps, rocks, baseball cards or antique glass based on their similarities: by size, country, geographic locale, team, color, or any of numerous other criteria.

Probably since humans existed, we have tried to categorize the things we see. Among the most famous of those who went on record with their classification systems are Aristotle, who sorted things by their method of reproduction, and Carolus Linneaus, who contributed his detailed system of naming things. In between, methods used morphology, or similarity of appearance, and in the 16th – 17th centuries when dissection was carried out and carefully documented, anatomical similarities bore more weight. More recently, the discovery of DNA has led us again to modify our classification system. As we gain more knowledge, we become ever more sophisticated at finding similarities and differences in things.

Unity in diversity is an underlying principle of great art. That a few sequences of DNA could produce the kaleidoscopic diversity we see in this world teeming with life is awesome. It is also to be expected. If the great artist could make something out of nothing, no doubt he could make many things out of a few.

Analyzing something, whether a work of art or our human origins, means seeing what things are alike and what things are different. You might do an analysis based on color, or on the light-dark values of colors used. You could analyze line, space, or texture. Each analysis would look

different from the others, yet all would be useful. All would give us a basis for comparing one work with another, and perhaps for finding common elements among them.

Does the work have meaning? Our universe does: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1).

Is it beautiful? God’s own handiwork, as well as his instructions to human workmen, were “for glory and for beauty” (Exodus 28:2).

Is it useful? God’s own word is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Each analysis of a work may reveal something about its purpose. But do any of them show the artist’s process of creating it?

In the end, the only way to know for sure is to ask the artist.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Programmed for Godliness

It's funny how attached a programmer can get to his programs. Especially when you are writing from scratch, your signature style is written all over it. You may come up with an elegant solution to a logical problem, and delight in the beauty and simplicity with which you can perform your company's business.

Once your program is in production, others are likely to look at it too. If it looks good to them, and they see its utility, they may want to borrow some of its code. It's not theirs, they didn't create it, spent no time or effort on it, but they are going to profit from borrowing it anyway. "Stealing" code is OK.

In fact, Information Technology departments actively encourage this. Rarely do we create a program that hasn't gotten at least some of its code from those that went before. The secret to successful pilfering is in finding a program that is doing things similar to what you want to do. Development proceeds much faster when we have an example to follow.

Spiritual development can benefit from example too. This is no doubt one of the reasons we are given Jesus' story. It is one thing to read that we should behave with integrity and love even in the face of injustice. It is something else to actually observe someone doing it. Through the narratives of Jesus' life, we can watch him teaching, encouraging, healing, and showing compassion, though there were many who wanted to destroy him.

Peter's advice is to "submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to the harsh...Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow him in his steps (1 Peter 3:18-21).

Treating a harsh master with respect does not come easily. It is quite a different approach than standing up for one's rights. Instead, it acknowledges the right of everyone – including harsh masters – to receive our respect.

Because it is contrary to our nature, we need a solid example to help us hold our retaliatory urge in check. There is value in asking "What Would Jesus Do?" We may not always know for sure what Jesus would do, but we do have his example, and we can often extrapolate from that.

When we ourselves are in a position of authority, we usually think of our own right to be respected and esteemed. Yet Jesus gave us an example here too. He was the teacher, his disciples the students. But Jesus washed their feet – a humble task – and not the other way around (John 13:15).

Jesus' examples show us that regardless of our position in the world, we are here as servants, not to secure our own gain or approval.

We likewise serve as examples to others, for good or for bad. To Timothy, it is written “set an example for the believers, in speech, in life, in love, in faith, in purity” (I Timothy 4:12).

You, in fact, may be the only glimpse of Jesus that some people have. Even if not, your example is a powerful adjunct to the lessons of scripture.

Like the IT manager who knows to “work smart” by encouraging the copying of existing code, we can follow after the pattern Jesus set, and in turn provide the code for others.

“Follow my example,” said Paul, “as I follow the example of Christ” (I Corinthians 11:1). If we find the right models, our job will be easier, and we will be programmed for a godly life.

Dennis and Vicki Martin

Faith and Doubt

Was anyone really surprised when the letters of Mother Theresa came to light, exposing posthumously her struggle to believe? If you have not struggled with doubt, it may be that your faith is not strong enough.

When I was younger, there was a popular saying among those my age: “don’t trust anyone over thirty”. Having already discovered the elusiveness of certainty, I had my own motto: “don’t trust anyone who is sure.” It’s one that I still go by.

But if certainty is not to be found, what does that say about faith? Do we need faith? Unequivocally, the Bible tells us that we do, for “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Some of us (and I count myself among them) crave certainty so much that we become obsessed with “making sure”. It is good to be reasonably sure. It is wise to base your decisions on probable outcomes. But certainty is not needed, nor can it ever be achieved.

Some have the idea that any time we believe something that cannot be proven, we are foolish and gullible. But that is not the picture of faith that the Bible gives us. “Blind faith” would indeed be foolish, but it is neither commanded nor commended in the Bible. Reasoned faith, on the other hand, comes highly recommended.

The idea that faith is blind, or that love is blind, contradicts the wisdom of the Bible. “He who does not love is blind...and cannot see afar off” (2 Peter 1:9). Far from blinding us, love gives us sight, or rather, insight. Faith is like that too.

Abraham, who is held up as a great example of the Old Testament faithful, believed God (Romans 4:3). Did he have proof? No. To God alone belongs certainty. But neither was his faith without substance. Abraham, of all the Old Testament figures, is called “the Friend of God” (James 2:23). Love, friendship, faith. None of these are blind. Yet all entail uncertainty.

Though certainty may be out of reach, reason isn’t. “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It’s not just a wish. It has substance. It comes with evidence. Faith comes, not by ignorance, but “by hearing – and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).

Knowledge does not lead us away from faith, though what is “falsely called knowledge” (1 Timothy 6) can. True knowledge will nourish our faith.

But doesn’t knowledge lead to certainty? And if certainty excludes faith, how can knowledge lead to faith?

The relationship between faith and doubt is similar to that between courage and fear. If you have no fear, you don't need courage. Courage is needed only when there is something to be afraid of. Likewise, we don't need faith when there is no possibility of doubt. Faith and courage enable us to go beyond our weaknesses; to act in spite of fear, to believe in spite of doubt.

Certainty for us is a future prospect. For now, "we walk by faith, not by sight" (I Corinthians 5:7). But there will be a time when no faith is required. When Christ appears to confirm the words of God once for all, then we too will be certain, and faith will be a thing of the past. For "Now we see in a glass darkly, but then face to face" (I Corinthians 13:12).

Dennis and Vicki Martin

The Ultimate Gift

From China and India to Mexico and South America, from the Assyrians in the Middle East to the Druids in England, to the Etruscans by the Mediterranean – all over the world, there is evidence that human sacrifice was practiced to assuage the anger of the gods.

Many people have seen a similarity between those gods who needed to be placated with sacrifices and the God of the Bible, whose very plan to save us included the sacrifice of his beloved son.

But the similarity is a superficial one. The God of the Bible abhors human sacrifice. In Jeremiah 32:35, God remarks on those “who cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire”. This is not God’s way. It is an activity “which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination to cause Judah to sin.”

Nor did it please God that Jesus was put to death.

The parable of the Lord of the Vineyard illustrates God’s displeasure with those who murdered Jesus. After the workers had beaten and killed some of his servants, the Lord “having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved...sent him also last to them saying, ‘they will reverence my son’”. But the workers conspired against him instead, saying “This is the heir; come, let’s kill him and the inheritance will be ours!” (Mark 12: 6-7, 9).

Yet from the earliest times, God gave his people a code of law that included sacrifices. The book of Leviticus details the rules for burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, offerings for holy days, and offerings for every day. Sacrifices were part of every Israelite’s life.

These sacrifices are alluded to when we read that Jesus “needed not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself” (Hebrews 7:27).

We are called to follow his example, “and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God” ((Ephesians 5:2).

Sacrifice is clearly part of both the old and the new testament message. Yet God condemns both those who put Jesus to death, and also some who offered sacrifices under his own Old Testament Law.

Isaiah recounts the words of God: “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to me?...I am full of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me...bring no more vain oblations...they are a trouble to me; I am weary to bear them” (Isaiah 1:10-14).

The Psalmist too recognizes that shedding blood is not itself God's goal: "Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire...burnt offering and sin offering you have not required" (Psalm 40:6). "For you do not desire sacrifice, otherwise I would give it: you do not delight in burnt offering" (Psalm 51:16).

Is God contradicting himself? Why make sacrifice a central feature of worship and then say it is not required? But God does not leave us to be confused:

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit," says the Psalmist ((51:17). "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise".

So, he does want sacrifice after all!

What else might that involve? Isaiah tells us: "wash you, make yourself clean...cease doing evil; Learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:16-17).

And from the prophet Samuel we learn that "to obey is better than sacrifice" (I Samuel 15:22).

Nor do the New Testament writers leave us without explanation. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1). A living sacrifice? Isn't this a contradiction in terms?

But there is part of us that we should put to death. The apostle Paul calls it the "old man": "knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him... that henceforth we should not serve sin. Likewise, count yourselves also to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:6,11).

Sacrifice, we find, is at the heart of acceptable worship. But it must be self-sacrifice. No other kind will do. All of the animals sacrificed in keeping the Law were worthless if they did not teach this lesson. The Law was, in fact, our "schoolmaster to bring us to Christ" (Galatians 3:27).

Jesus is the perfect example of sacrifice. God did not require Jesus' death in order to be appeased. Jesus did not die to placate God, but to persuade us. Jesus died so that we could see what he was willing to do for us. He died to show us what love is; to show us what obedience is; he died to change us, not to appease God.

God neither put Jesus to death, nor required that we do so.

So how is it then that Jesus' sacrifice can save us? By giving himself for us, he reaches out in grace, and by seeking that grace we reach back to him in love. And in that connection, "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:7).